



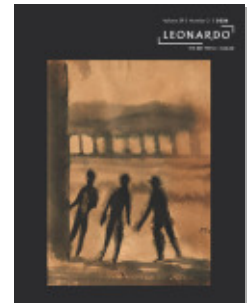
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The Arrogant Ape: The Myth of Human Exceptionalism and Why It Matters by Christine Webb (review)

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significance, often with the help of fellow practitioners, also feeling their way. The diagram/sketches, following ecclesiastical examples representing the Christ or St. Sebastian figures, often incorporated words. Healer/researchers added speech bubbles, arrows, and lines linking to different parts of the anatomy, devices quite novel in the medical praxis of medieval Europe, and methods that thereby shared knowledge, such as providing guidance for the use of bloodletting, a widespread medical panacea. Knowing precisely where a vein is located was as important then, I can attest, as it is today. The pictures reflect the confidence with which practitioners, often working with professional artists, developed their knowledge of the human body, its systems, peculiarities, and its magical beauty. Described as a continuity, initially by the Arabs and then adopted in the Europe of the Middle Ages, led to the wider intellectualization of the healing crafts, later leading to surgeons, each advancing their specialist knowledge of the wound, and/or of the treatment of disease, adapting and revising the previous notes, diagrams, and finished paintings. The illustrations in this superbly presented volume are small compared to their original dimensions, frustrating attempts to read the notations made within the image frame. Many seem to contain the kind of enticing detail vital to tracing the development of medical practice, or to simply enjoying the abstract visual world into which many of these representations can transform. The originals can be sourced from the adjacent bibliographic detail provided for web searching or archive visitation.

Overtly, these are matters close to the heart of our glorious corporeality. We are all subject to the vicissitudes of our corporeal presence and, depending on where we live, may have easy access to the present-day medical professionals who stand on the shoulders of their medieval pioneers. It's a history that has often been suppressed at a cost to women in particular, the patriarchy taking charge as soon as

new knowledge appeared, in the form of notations such as they are presented here, with a fluent and engaging analysis by the author, concluding with a brief acknowledgment of the wounds caused by military violence, which, counterintuitively, has little to contribute to this essentially civilian history. There is also much in the volume for the student of scientific method, documenting findings as they are revealed, while working alongside artists and other disciplines to refine and propagate the knowledge as it becomes synthesized and resynthesized.

THE ARROGANT APE: THE MYTH OF HUMAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND WHY IT MATTERS

by Christine Webb. Avery/Penguin, NY, NY, U.S.A., 2025. 336 pp. eBook. ISBN: 9780593543153.

Reviewed by Gregory F. Tague.

<https://doi.org/10.1162/LEON.r.2642>

Human arrogance, our sense of exceptionalism over every other species, is responsible for many harms, notably the climate crisis. We have always believed our mission is to conquer nature, an attitude unfortunate for Earth's inhabitants. Why have we been inculcated into a human/animal divide that elevates our minds, consciousness, and emotions over theirs? In *The Arrogant Ape*, primatologist Christine Webb offers encyclopedic coverage of these and more subjects in a fast-moving, enjoyable book. Importantly, Webb lays the onus of human arrogance on ideology, veering far from Darwin's insistence that there are continuities across species, not a hierarchy that places humans at a pinnacle. Sapience and sentience do not solely belong to humans. Experiments designed by humans to test animal intelligence often ignore their life-world (or *umwelt*) and how their cognitive abilities evolved not in a lab but in a forest or ocean. Based on her field research and facts from the scholarly community, Webb envisions a new relationship with nature to break the myth, as she calls it, of human exceptionalism.

Rapport with the natural world could begin in childhood. Webb examines, in her words, the unlearning curve. Children are trained to disregard any moral consideration of animals while fed a diet of chickens, pigs, cows, fish, etc. She cites a Yale 2021 study noting how adults were more willing to save a human life over any animal, but children were more willing to save animals over humans. It seems there's a learned bias for human exceptionalism. This distance is evident linguistically in how cows become beef and calves become veal; worse, no one eats *the* chicken but merely *chicken*, Webb says. Animals, we are taught, are in the impersonal realm of "it." Furthermore, we discriminate based on species. Webb explains, for example, that speciesism is how some animals, depending on cultural differences, are welcomed into one's home while others are eaten. She notes how we are not taught speciesism but learn it socially, whether at home, in high school biology, or from fast-food restaurant menus. Animals become objects for human use.

In many Western urban cultures, children learn to view the world from an anthropocentric point of view, mostly because of their lack of contact with nature. Many urban and even suburban youngsters know only a degraded natural world and not the rural landscape of, say, their great-grandparents. The mental model of a shifting baseline (e.g., fewer trees) affects the choices young people make as consumers. Nonetheless, Webb suggests that young children respond more naturally to animals and have a truer sense of biophilia (E.O. Wilson's term for a natural connection to wildlife) than adults. Psychological separation comes in time as children are encouraged to move away from imaginative play that incorporates animals. The problem, according to Webb, is that this baseline can't shift much more, considering all of the unsustainable damage heaped on forest and ocean ecosystems.

As human agriculturalists began to control elements of nature, anthropocentric ideas energized. Webb notes

how we see this explicitly with Aristotle and his *scala naturae*, or what became known as the great chain of being, persistently privileging human rationality over every other species and justifying dominance over nature. This attitude was encouraged by the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, the Enlightenment of the long eighteenth century, and thereafter by the industrial revolution. Yet many other species, from insects to birds, are intelligent tool users, chipping away at any notion of human exceptionalism. Some corvid species actually make tools; some animals knowingly self-medicate. Webb goes on to describe how animals exhibit a range of emotions, like prosocial consolation, as she learned firsthand. Concerning language, species from vervet monkeys to prairie dogs communicate about predators. Though recent for Webb to cite, we have findings that some primate species, and evidently dolphins and elephants, name conspecifics and respond to naming. Says Webb, the notion of human exceptionalism is quite exclusive if you are a woman, non-white, non-Western, poor, etc. Speciesism, racism, sexism, and xenophobia are related, making justice for nature more difficult.

Why, Webb asks, are Western, educated, rich, and democratic children often used in comparative studies with captive primates who have been reared in cages outside of their natural homes? These studies are used to make generalized statements about cognition, intelligence, and reciprocal behaviors where, not surprisingly, the humans are deemed exceptional. Meanwhile, in the wild or in sanctuaries, compared with the deprived environment of labs, primates are cooperative and share food, just like humans. Importantly, Webb notes how, as with humans, there are individual differences; variations can also be social, where one group of chimps in the wild is more empathic than another. These findings deflate speciesism, which tends to lump all groups of individuals into one categorical box. Experiments on animals,

or by analogy imprisoned people, destroy their ability to choose and perform social functions. In these experiments, as in dehumanizing those in prison, experimenters bolster preconceived notions (confirmation bias) of superiority over others. Yet, we use animals, from mice to monkeys, in medical research labs serving our needs because they are biologically like us. If so, is it not unethical to use those like us in bad ways?

Webb catalogs the abilities of species beyond their extraordinary senses of touch, sight, smell, taste, and hearing; echolocation, thermal perception, electroreception, etc. Their *umwelt* is far different from ours, although we routinely compare their advanced, evolved adaptations to ours. They're also consciously aware of their own bodies in relation to space, time, and other creatures (e.g., how to navigate in a group of conspecifics). Animals have minds since they often consider another's perspective and remember another's actions. There's a growing acceptance of consciousness in a range of species. See The Cambridge Declaration of Consciousness (2012) and The N.Y. Declaration on Animal Consciousness (2024) as two instances. There's debate, however, because many people continue to use humans as the measure of all living organisms without considering evolutionary adaptations in, and collaboration as shapers of, an ecological niche. Pain and conscious experience likely run along a spectrum across species and not as a simple human-nonhuman divide.

Concerning baboon field work, of which Webb has many notable accounts, she tried to view the primates as social beings and not as objects of study. Indeed, one hot afternoon in a cave, she encountered a young female baboon. The two just kept company, helping Webb realize that her fellow primate was a thinking and feeling individual just like her. Individual differences or personalities are a hallmark of many species and not confined to the human realm. Stepping down from our height of supposed exceptionalism, Webb

intimates, we could possibly know the worlds of other species. She goes on to suggest, echoing biophilia from the opening pages, that we can profit from sharing interspecies experiences, as is evident from animals used in therapy. The implication is that intersubjective contact could extend to nature, helping people grasp the singular lives of wildlife.

Webb discusses mutualism and symbiosis as opposed to distortions of Darwin's "struggle for existence" and, worse, Herbert Spencer's "survival of the fittest." Research of our close relatives, chimpanzees and bonobos, reveals a complex picture of both competition and cooperation. Likewise, mutualistic behaviors are seen among trees and fungi; symbiotic relationships that question individuality are seen in lichen, a combination of alga and fungus with other microorganisms. Skepticism of plant cooperation, Webb notes, persists because of a Western insistence on our exceptionalism and how we tend to divide ourselves from other species by using words like "nature." The distorted view of evolution places humans atop a hierarchy and hence an attitude of using natural resources to our advantage in spite of and even during this climate crisis. Webb sees technology (her example is solar geoengineering) not as a real solution—blocking sunlight could have devastating effects on ecosystems and weather patterns, could hinder food production, and could foster a license to continue burning fossil fuels. Webb goes on to say how human exceptionalism breeds a sense that we are immune from the problems we've created, i.e., we'll somehow correct climate change with technology, as if we are exempt from and better than nature.

The previous ideas about salvation by technology run contrary to the thinking of Indigenous people, who see themselves as intimate parts of the landscape. Webb offers some wisdom about Indigenous ways of life as, perhaps, an antidote to industrial practices and consumerist living. Indigenous people operate on a reciprocal continuum with other forms of

life, like badgers and coyotes hunting together (her example). Unfortunately, Indigenous knowledge and native science have been suppressed by the dominant Western status quo. This leads Webb to note that science is not immune to cultural or even political influence. Why? Because Western science can impose thoughts and ideas, she says, where it might be better to experience being in a place to develop an understanding of life there. Opposed to Indigenous rights of nature emerging in many countries, consider industrial practices like factory farming and animal research facilities, all supported by corporate science and technology.

Christine Webb's *Arrogant Ape* would be extremely useful in senior high school or college undergraduate classes focused on animal ethics or environmental studies. Webb's prescription for the underlying problem generating many ills, and especially climate change, is to dismantle the myth of human exceptionalism. That can happen through education and cultural evolution. She aptly and with grace sets that pace in her book. Fortunately, making an impact practically and culturally in opposition to human arrogance, there are groups with unbiased studies of plants and animals so carefully outlined in Webb's timely and compelling book.

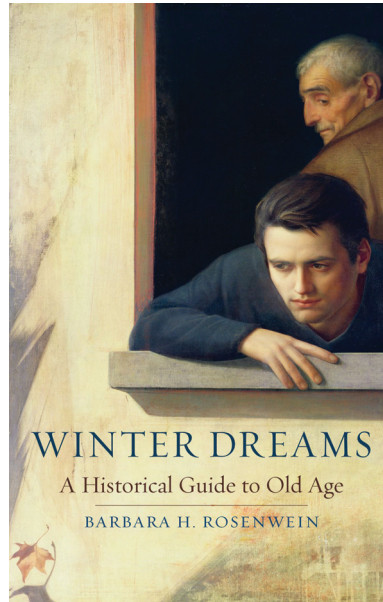
WINTER DREAMS: A HISTORICAL GUIDE TO OLD AGE

by Barbara H. Rosenwein. Reaktion Books, London, U.K., 2025. 264 pp., illus. Trade. ISBN: 9781836390916.

Reviewed by Jan Baetens.

<https://doi.org/10.1162/LEON.r.2643>

Being old is not the same as feeling old. It certainly makes sense to maintain a sharp distinction between the two: "Young" people may already feel old; "old" people, even "old old" people, that is, old people having difficulties in taking care of themselves, may feel young at heart. Taking this observation as its starting point, *Winter Dreams* raises two fundamental questions. (1) What does it mean to "feel old," or more precisely, what are



the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and *dreams* (here the umbrella term of the old age experience)? This is not an easy question, since having access to other people's minds is already a complex endeavor, whereas having access to old people's minds often seems out of reach. Old people "live in the past": They may suffer from dementia; they are not always capable of expressing their own experience; their memoirs mix fiction and reality; etc. (2) How can we properly analyze what old people dream of? Which are the sources, documents, or testimonies we can rely on? To what extent are these records complete, representative, or reliable? Whose documents are we actually analyzing? History mainly transmits the voices of rich and fortunate people, but what about other groups and categories, like women or the poor? How to avoid sweeping generalizations? What to do with historical misrepresentations due to, for example, misogyny or patriarchy? The author of this book shies away from simple answers just as she also refuses any form of presentism: This book is not about correcting or debunking ideas and feelings that we may be uncomfortable with today; it is a serious and inspiring attempt to reconstruct a *longue durée* history of humankind's winter dreams.

A specialist in the history of mentalities, with important publications on medieval France and the history of anger, but also on the theory and methodology of her field, the author offers a very original approach to an understudied aspect of the history of mentalities. Readers may be surprised by the absence of direct references to the French *Annales* school (Philippe Ariès or Alain Corbin, to name just a few specialists of the history of "private life"), but that does not mean that the methodological grounding of the book is not robust. The choices made by the author, who has really managed to write a book that will be of interest to both the specialized and the general reader, are sound as well as refreshing. First, Rosenwein's case studies offer an extremely broad perspective on the transformations of the winter dreams. The historical scope of the study ranges from Homer to contemporary elderly homes, thus mixing a great variety of periods and cultures (mainly Western, but Rosenwein rightly pays a lot of attention to Confucianist philosophy and politics). Second, the historical records or traces used by the author give priority to a special kind of source, namely *art*. In the tradition of Raymond Williams's ideas on the "structures of feelings" of a culture, as first elaborated in *The Long Revolution*, Rosenwein strongly relies on properly artistic expressions, both literary and pictorial. Williams's book is not quoted, but one feels there is a clear family resemblance. Of course, *Winter Dreams* does not follow Williams's Marxist line of thinking; the book does not frame the idea of "change" in a political or dialectical way, although on every page it makes very clear how much the personal is also the political and vice versa. Moreover, most of the artistic sources analyzed in *Winter Dreams* belong to the traditional canon, a methodological stance that may be at odds with the foregrounding of the popular and the vernacular in cultural studies. Yet Rosenwein's focus on the canon is beyond any doubt a very strong and uplifting point of her book, for it also